

Closing the Achievement Gap

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This year, a number of changes are planned by the Obama Administration, the Department of Education, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers and others to address the achievement gap in the United States, a gap that begins before children even enter school and widens as children grow up.

The achievement gap, which the National Governors Association calls “one of the most pressing education-policy challenges that states currently face” is almost universally defined as a problem of low-income children and the distance between them and their higher-income counterparts in academic achievement. That gap certainly exists, and absolutely must be addressed. But there is a much larger and more significant gap—a gap whereby all of our children aren’t living up to their full potential and aren’t gaining the life skills they need to thrive now and in the future. There is no question in my mind that we won’t be able to address the achievement gap for *some* of our children if we don’t address this *life skill gap* for *all* of our children.

In nationally representative studies of employers conducted by the Families and Work Institute, employers tell us again and again that young people don’t have the life skills—*not just the content information*— they need for the 21st century.

Others have talked about skills for the 21st century before, but eight years and interviews with more than 85 of the leading researchers in child development and neuroscience have led me to new insights about which skills truly have short-term and long-term effects on children's development. Unfortunately, however, we aren't turning this knowledge into action well enough or soon enough.

Often when people talk about skills, it turns into a debate—skills versus content, but that's the wrong debate. Both are essential and they are inextricably interconnected for the simple reason that life skills enable us to *use* the knowledge we have. Essential life skills involve the part of our brain (the prefrontal cortex) that weaves together our social, emotional and intellectual capacities in pursuit of our goals.

Life skills are tied to academic achievement, without question. Take one of these skills—*focus and self control*. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia University and a group of other academics recently reviewed six studies that followed children over time. Out of literally hundreds of analyses, only three competencies that children had when they entered school were strongly related to their later success in reading and math. Two are obvious: the children who were good at math and reading when they entered school were likely to be good at math and reading years later. But the third is less obvious. It is “attention skills.” As Brooks-Gunn says, attention skills “allow children to focus on something in a way that maximizes the information they get out of it.”

Life skills can be improved and it is never too late. Megan McClelland and her colleagues from Oregon State found that when preschool children improved their focus and self control during the year, it was equivalent to having an extra month of pre-kindergarten in their gains in literacy skills, and an extra 2.8 months in vocabulary skills. And focus and self control can be taught, as illustrated by the computer game experiments of Michael Posner of the University of Oregon with four- to six-year-olds.

Life skills are at the heart of learning. For example, the skill of *making connections*—that is figuring out what’s the same, what’s different and sorting things into categories—is a skill that underlies literacy, mathematics, and the sciences. In addition, *making unusual connections* is at the heart of creativity. And in a world where people can google for information, this is a must-have capacity.

Life skills underlie good relationships with others. *Perspective taking*—understanding what others think and feel —goes far beyond empathy. As the late Peter Drucker, considered the father of modern management has said, “an outside-in perspective”—seeing things as customers and clients would see them—is the ability that is behind the launch of most successful businesses. For children, studies have found links between perspective taking and reading skills as well as between perspective taking and being involved in less conflict with other kids.

Another example is the skill of *taking on challenges*. In today's multi-tasking, distracting, complex world children must do more than cope with challenges—they need to actively take them on.

There are everyday things that busy parents and teachers can do to promote life skills. For example, Megan McClelland uses a measure called the Head-to-Toe Task: children are asked to do the opposite of what the experimenter tells them to do. If the experimenter says, "Touch your toes," the children are to touch their heads; if told to touch their heads, the children are to touch their toes. Playing this as a game calls on the children to pay attention to the directions, remember the rules, and inhibit the tendency to go on automatic and follow the directions of the experimenter.

Life skills must be promoted in *age-appropriate* ways. It would be counter-productive to expect two or three-year-old to be able to switch from one rule to another when playing the Head-to-Toe Task. In addition, life skills must be promoted in *playful* ways. There would be nothing worse than taking away the fun in these games—turning them into drill and kill routines that sap their purpose, which is to engage children in learning.

It is time for real reform in addressing the achievement gap, but if we do not address the *life skills gap* for all of our children we will not make the gains we as a country, as parents, and as teachers sorely need and deserve.

